

# Exploring the relevance of Holocaust education for human rights education

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**Abstract** Can Holocaust education be considered a tool for human rights education? If so, to what extent? These questions elicit discussions among a wide range of educators, and interest among politicians, educational planners, and ministries in charge of memorials. At first glance the obvious answer seems to be yes; both educators and students have strong expectations in this regard. But educators in both fields can find it difficult to include both topics in one programme. The article clarifies some basic concepts regarding the traditions of Holocaust education and human rights education, and then makes a distinction among learning *about*, learning *for*, and learning *within a framework of* human rights. This distinction makes it possible to differentiate the possible contributions, and the limits, of Holocaust education as a human rights tool in these three areas. Also, as these two fields evolved in very separate ways, common projects could bring together concepts and experiences from both fields to develop further possibilities.

**Keywords** Human rights education · Holocaust education · Citizenship education

## Introduction

Is Holocaust education a tool for teaching about human rights? Should it be? Can it be? As a member of the Education Working Group (EWG) of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF),<sup>1</sup> I can attest that these questions are discussed widely, and that the answers differ depending on the national and regional context. They do point out the need to consider how history can be relevant

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<sup>1</sup> For more information please see [www.holocausttaskforce.org](http://www.holocausttaskforce.org).

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today and in the future, and to consider questions of rights, of dignity, and of access to full citizenship.

The expression “Holocaust education” is ambiguous; in fact, I hesitate to use it, because it is not well defined. First, because the term Holocaust has theological connotations and lacks analytical meaning, it can sometimes mystify rather than clarify. French speakers prefer the expression “Shoah”; it may not be much more analytical, but at least it does not have a Christian meaning. And the term Holocaust education does not indicate clearly whether it involves learning about history, literature, or moral issues, or learning about the Jews, or the Nazis, or other victims of Nazi politics. But it is used in recognition of a field and it has an institutional dimension even if the term does not explain exactly what it addresses.

Often, the words of politicians, educational planners, and ministries in charge of memorials make it seem obvious that Holocaust education (HE) should be a tool for human rights education (HRE). Society places a certain pressure on memorials, educational programmes, and memorial days, that they not only be opportunities to learn about the past, but also have an impact on the future, i.e. in human rights education and in education for democratic citizenship. Educators who deal with such issues on a daily basis find that they, and their students, have strong expectations in this regard. Nevertheless, they often say it is very difficult to teach about both the Holocaust and human rights (HR) in one school programme, during one visit, or within one project.

### Teaching and learning about the Holocaust today

Before we can begin to connect Holocaust education to human rights education, we must first understand the need to teach about the Holocaust, and what is being done today. To begin, I report some findings from a study we conducted in Western Switzerland, interviewing history teachers about their experiences teaching about the Holocaust (Eckmann and Heimberg 2009). Our research question was linked less to HRE than to citizenship education; it explored how these teachers felt, and what their experiences had been in teaching the topic of the Holocaust. They declared that to them it is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, topic to teach. One said that “it is important to show that it is an unavoidable topic, something difficult but decisive, something that shows a turning point in the reflection of human beings and history”. The Shoah is the culminating point of the programme and for some of the teachers it was the reason for having studied history as such.

But they are also quite aware that this strong conviction could weigh too heavily on the students: “For me it is not a topic like the others, and that is the danger; but I am careful not to focus all of my teaching on this point”. They are also aware of the risk that students may identify too strongly with the victims: “I am afraid of overdoing it in the direction of the victims [...] I don’t want to depress the students, so I also show the aspect of resistance, to provide some hope”.

These and other testimonies show that for history teachers the Holocaust is a crucial topic in the curriculum. They are concerned that students might object to studying the Holocaust; in fact this seldom happens, and most of the overt objections arose in 2005, the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, when the topic received considerable media coverage. They also think very carefully about pedagogical approaches, and about *how* to teach this topic. Although they are deeply convinced of its importance, they feel it is difficult to explain *why* it is so important to teach about the Holocaust.

The EWG developed guidelines or recommendations on why to teach about the Holocaust, what to teach about the Holocaust, and how to teach about the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> It appears clear—and other studies show similar results—that the most difficult part is articulating *why* to teach about the Holocaust.

Teachers also find it difficult to answer questions such as “Why are you always speaking about Jews?” and “Why not speak about Rwanda, about slavery or about the Roma?” Or, in post-Soviet countries they might ask, “Why not speak about the Gulag?”. In Western European contexts, we observed that such questions lead teachers to adopt new strategies. Usually in the lower grades the Holocaust is taught within the context of World War II and the rise of Nazism. But more and more educators, especially in the upper grades, tend to teach it within the context of comparing genocides, or within the context of topics like racism, totalitarianism, and colonialism.

### Focusing on history or on memory?

In Latin countries, the distinction between history and memory is often emphasized. Learning about the Holocaust has to focus on history, not on memory, as the first aim is knowledge, not commemoration. It might be a different issue when one is visiting a memorial, exploring a local area, or interviewing witnesses. Of course, to a certain extent, the teachers want to create in their students a sense of empathy with the victims—which is a basic requirement. But in order for students to gain an understanding that spans the experience of individuals or families and their own country’s role in the larger event, and to grasp the Holocaust in its entirety, Holocaust educators often discuss a focus that includes three elements. These are: the overall picture or historical framework; the specific history of one’s own national context; and detailed knowledge about a place, person, or memorial, linked to a specific territory or to a community.

Each element offers different benefits. Detailed knowledge of a place or a person facilitates access for students, and helps teachers make it concrete and tangible. Students also need the overall picture so they can locate the isolated event or place in the frame of the history of World War II, Nazism and the Holocaust, and establish relationships, for example between war and genocide. And the specific national context gives students the opportunity to reflect self-critically about the history of their own society and its involvement in this part of history. But learning about the Holocaust also means dealing with the perspectives of all the other groups—victims, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers, and opponents—as well as with their memories. Often this means dealing with competing memories, and even with denial of memory.

This leads to the question of memory. A community of memories keeps alive the memory of its own members, and promotes the commemoration of its own people. In Europe, however, the various national or social narratives differ. Ours is a Europe of divided memories—divided along the lines of different historical experiences. Even within each national memory the narratives of specific groups may differ. But to address divided memories, we educators must share memories and listen to all the various stories. We have to build a complex, multi-perspective vision of the past based on a dialogue of memories, between communities of remembrance, and we must mutually recognize victimhood and suffering, yet we must always refrain from any kind of denial. Achieving this combination is not easy in groups with a diversity of narratives.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/education/guidelines-for-teaching.html>.

In this context, it is important to counter a common misinterpretation: that Holocaust education is above all a duty of memory. In fact, it is first and foremost a duty of history: the duty to transmit and to teach and learn the history. Too much emphasis has been placed on the duties of memory and of commemoration, and some students react negatively to this. Even if one aim of HE is to keep alive the memory of the victims, commemoration does not have the same meaning for everyone; for some it means holding onto the memory of the death, and preserving one's group identity, while for others it means taking responsibility for one's own history. My intent is not to oppose memory and history, nor to choose between them, but rather to emphasize the need to distinguish between them, and to focus on both, according to the educational context.

Moreover, the *history of memory* has to be studied; it is important to understand the context and the history of the decision to create a memorial or a commemoration day. Which advocacy groups took the initiative to propose a memorial place or a commemoration date, when, and for whom? What groups were involved in memorialization politics? What victims are named, who is mentioned in the official memory, and who is not included in it?

Focusing on history or on the lessons of history?

Another misinterpretation is what is called in French "*Trop de morale, pas assez d'histoire*": too much moralizing and not enough history, that is, putting the lessons of history before the knowledge of the history itself. Precisely because it is such a crucial topic, many teachers or educators want to draw out moral lessons, and these lessons are not always correct.

Also, history cannot be transposed to the present in a linear way. For example, in connection with learning about Nazism and the Holocaust, students may think about contemporary stereotyping and conclude that they can now see where stereotyping leads. But such a conclusion may be too simple, because stereotyping alone does not necessarily lead to genocide; in this example, students draw on their personal feelings, and then move too rapidly to parallels with the mechanisms of state-sanctioned murder.

Another risk lies in trying to draw lessons without knowing the history, or in attempting to compare and conclude without precise, concrete historical elements. Of course it is impossible to know everything about the Holocaust, but lessons must be taught carefully and based on historical sources wherever possible. Then students can compare, once they are clear about what, how, and why to compare. Comparison is per se a scientific method that requires knowledge and tools to be conducted properly. And comparing is not equating. It is also important to know *what* to compare: for example, compare facts such as legal dispositions against targeted groups, or ideological settings, or ways of defining and excluding targeted groups.

### **What does human rights education (HRE) in Holocaust education (HE) mean?**

Having considered this background, and keeping in mind that learning about the Holocaust is a very complex field in and of itself, I now ask: Can Holocaust education be human rights education?

HRE is also a complex topic. It includes the history of the idea of human rights and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, along with the more legal and institutional dimensions of the various conventions and their implementation, as well as the philosophy

and culture of human rights. Finally, a pedagogical and motivational dimension includes understanding and standing up for human rights and against their violation.

Scholars usually distinguish two main options in human rights education (Lohrenscheit 2002): learning *about* human rights and learning *for* human rights. Recently a third dimension has been added, which I see as equally crucial: learning *with (or within)* the framework of human rights.

### Learning about, for, and within the framework of human rights

These three dimensions deserve to be considered in more detail. First, learning *about* human rights involves the cognitive dimension. It includes knowledge about the history of human rights and about the institutional dimensions of the Human Rights Council, along with other aspects such as the various conventions, states' reports and responsibilities, and reports and possible interventions by civil society, as well as lobbying and media work. It includes awareness of both the legal and institutional systems and the violations of human rights. In this dimension the emphasis is on knowing, understanding, and valuing.

Second, learning *for* human rights includes a motivational aspect and the development of competencies to act, such as advocacy within the environment where each of us lives, in our own communities or cities. Learning for human rights implies knowing about such rights, recognizing violations of them, and learning to protect and reestablish these rights. It also means knowing about one's own rights; as part of knowing about, respecting, and defending the rights of others, it requires an attitude of dignity and solidarity. Thus, the motivation to act is part of education for human rights, but not all of it. Education for HR also means developing competencies to act and learning about strategies like lobbying and advocacy. The emphasis is on respect, responsibility, and solidarity.

Third, learning *within a framework* of human rights includes not only the content, but also the learning process and the learning conditions that must be framed by HR considerations. The learning process must be coherent, connecting the content and the pedagogical methods of the process to the students' learning situation. Pedagogically, this requires that teachers use active methods such as learning by experience and peer education. This educational process must guarantee respect for HR and for the rights of the child as a frame for learning, for all children or students. This includes, for example, ensuring that all students and children have the right of access to all sectors of higher education, a right not everywhere guaranteed to the children of undocumented workers.

What are the possibilities for, and limitations to, implementing these dimensions within Holocaust education? I consider each one separately.

### Learning *about* HR in the context of HE

The first dimension, learning *about* human rights in the context of Holocaust education, offers many possibilities, including three I outline here. First, the link between World War II and the UN decision regarding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Genocide convention offer students the chance to learn about the history of the UDHR and the discussions about a genocide convention, as well as their institutional, judicial, and philosophical aspects. Students can also learn about violations of children's rights and actions to protect them. For example, the associations founded in the memory of Janus Korczak deal

extensively with children in the Holocaust and with children's rights.<sup>3</sup> Second, students can consider the philosophical and historical dimensions of the Holocaust in the context of discussions about what is usually called the "three generations of rights" referring to the UDHR, and deal thus with the differences in individual, social, and cultural rights.

Third, the study of the Holocaust provides many examples of the Nazis' extreme violations of human rights and can help develop awareness of such violations: the violation of the right to own property, of the right to freedom of movement, of the right to be protected by or from one's own state, and even the right to life. The history also includes violations by bystander countries; these include refusing to grant asylum or protection, failing to protect human dignity, denying access to citizenship, and failing to protect individuals from persecution by other states. Of course, Holocaust education also helps students see the need to protect human rights. The connection between the Holocaust and HR should not be seen as overly linear, because the debate on human rights started far earlier, and includes previous efforts such as the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* and the United States Bill of Rights. However the historical experience and the knowledge of the Holocaust have led to a fundamental reconceptualising of human rights, and favoured the embrace of human rights worldwide and the broad adoption of the universal declaration. In HE this strong bridge between the two is mainly shown through the extreme violations of HR.

We could sum up this dimension of learning about HR with Hannah Arendt's expression regarding the recognition of a crucial right: *the right to have rights*. Indeed the destiny of the Jews shows the extreme vulnerability of stateless persons who are denied any rights at all. Only states can ensure the right to have rights and to protect people, along with their rights and dignity. This points to the necessity for all people to hold full citizenship.

A limitation here is that all these topics can only be touched upon within HE. It is often difficult to delve into them more deeply within the timeframe available to teach about the Holocaust or while visiting a memorial.

### Learning *for* HR in the context of HE

The second dimension, learning *for* human rights in Holocaust education, would suggest learning and exercising advocacy and intervention to protect HR, and establishing or re-establishing rights that have been denied. This requires that students experience attitudes and patterns of acting, and that they work on specific cases, document violations, create networks, learn to lobby, etc. These activities recall the words of the well-known Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi, whose concept was learning by "head, heart, and hand"—so the hand means, also by acting.

But this dimension of learning *for* the protection or the reestablishment of HR seems limited and difficult to fulfill within HE, for several reasons. First, as the worst violation of HR, the Holocaust is not merely a lesson in learning how to prevent discrimination or how to fight against HR violations or how to protect HR. Also, HE does not directly provide opportunities to experiment with the various competencies required for action and intervention, such as lobbying or advocacy. Of course, students can consider examples of resistance and opposition, but those examples must be placed in the context of the political

<sup>3</sup> Korczak, a Polish-Jewish pediatrician and pedagogue, developed an educational perspective in his orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, based on respect for children and their rights. Although people offered to rescue him, he refused to abandon the children and was taken with them to Treblinka; there, they were probably all murdered.

situation, including the rise of state violence and state terror. Also, some teachers address the dilemmas of HR, or situations in which HR dilemmas arise, based on events during the era of National Socialism, promoting reflections on acting *for* HR. Confronting different perspectives on such dilemmas—such as the perspective of perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers and resisters—is one way to deal with moral judgment and a first step toward considering action.

### Learning *within* HR in the context of HE

The third dimension, learning *within* human rights in the context of Holocaust education, refers to the process, the atmosphere, and the pedagogical framework, but also to the legal and civic framework that must be established in accordance with HR principles. The rights of children and students must be protected, access to education for every child must be guaranteed, and the educational system must be constructed according to HR principles so it can ensure equal opportunities and a democratic structure.

On the other hand, learning within a framework of HR also means including HR attitudes in learning systems, active learning settings, and a democratic pedagogical approach. Also, peer education is a basic tool for HRE: as Jean Piaget pointed out, it is our peers, rather than our parents or teachers, who most influence us as we develop moral judgment. These pedagogical approaches must give students the space to deal with their personal or family experiences with rights and discrimination. Building on personal experiences is a powerful motivation for learning, whether those are personal experiences of discrimination, or experiences of witnessing discrimination against others. Such incidents and experiences often emerge during lessons about the Holocaust, or while visiting a memorial or watching a movie about it, and they enable students to establish links between past and present kinds of discrimination.

### Can, and should, Holocaust education be a tool for human rights education?

First, *can* Holocaust education be a tool for human rights education? I suggest that HE cannot fulfill all the requirements of HRE, but it can contribute to it significantly and it has great power to open minds. However, HRE can be present in HE, mainly through the dimension of learning about HR and learning within the frame of HR.

HE offers opportunities and is a starting point to confront HR issues. But even if it seems difficult to really learn *for* HR in the context of HE, it is nevertheless crucial to learn a few things *about* HR and learn *within a framework* of HR. Most teaching about the Holocaust addresses the HR dimensions only marginally, but they should be examined more closely, either before dealing with the Holocaust or later on, or in another setting. So HE constitutes a motivation and a starting point for an interest in HR, as a tool for awareness-building; it can also include several valuable elements of HRE, but it cannot be considered as its true core.

Still, this combination offers several possibilities to explore and new approaches to experience. Several recently initiated studies and projects in Europe are addressing this question and should bring us new insights. One example is the recent study by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) on the role of Holocaust commemoration sites and memorials for HRE. In Germany, an action-research study, led by a group of *Gedenkstättenpädagogen* or educators working in memorial sites and museums, has developed new training modules for guides at such sites. And a programme of the EVZ Foundation

supports projects linking history and HRE. A first evaluation of some of these projects (Scherr and Hormel 2008) has shown that this connection is not easy to handle in an integrated way: one topic or the other tends to dominate, and the less dominant one may be more of a pretext that is not addressed appropriately. This shows the need to develop concepts, and engage in further research and experimentation, in order to link these topics in a clearly articulated way.

Second, *should* Holocaust education be a tool for human rights education? Some people take it for granted that HE *is* HRE—perhaps too much for granted. Both are challenging tasks, but they do not represent the same kind of challenge. Moreover, the links that are established vary in each context, depending on the learning context as well as on the context of national history and experience. In Switzerland, for example, some teachers link HE to citizenship education, especially when they organize memorial days; moreover, the aims of HRE or citizenship education are mostly addressed by history teachers. But HRE aims not to deal mainly with the past, but instead to clearly address HR violations today in one's own national and social context.

At memorial sites, however, this link might be more difficult to achieve: some memorial places are cemeteries, places to mourn, places of memory. We must remember that even the best HE or HRE cannot “repair” the Holocaust, cannot undo what has happened, and cannot bring back to life those who were murdered. Educators may be tempted to try to forge this link, but such a goal may be too ambitious for HRE.

I suggest that we see HE and HRE as being elements of a triangle where we again find Pestalozzi's “head, heart, and hand”. Learning about the history of the Holocaust is a cognitive experience, and thus involves the head. Memory and commemoration involve the heart, and human rights education, including the dimension of acting *for* HR, involves the hands. These three cardinal points stand in a complex tension to each other. They can be placed on a continuum and we can draw various connections between them, depending on the combinations found in each learning setting. Each teaching module, each project or programme dealing with the Holocaust, each memorial place or museum, has a specific potential and deals in a specific way with a specific combination of these three dimensions: closer or more distant to history, to commemoration, or to HRE, according to its specific context. But no educational approach can fully address all three of them at once, so teachers must make some choices.

## Further challenges

Within the possibilities and limits sketched above, several further challenges exist and new projects and experiences should be promoted in the future.

### Reinforce links to neighbouring topics

The Holocaust is an important topic in the teaching of history; as such, it is linked to the European history curriculum. But it can also be placed under the umbrella of other frameworks or allied topics, which would benefit from closer links. Examples of such frameworks are intercultural education, antiracist education, and education for democratic citizenship (or citizenship education). This article has addressed human rights education, but those other fields should also reinforce their linkages to HE. For example, antiracist education is impossible to carry out without some attention to the Holocaust; on the other hand, antiracist education is not limited to the topic of the Holocaust, as it includes present



forms of racism. Intercultural education targets the question of how people can live together when they come from diverse cultural, national, or religious groups, and even bigger questions that underlie relationships between minorities and majorities, as well as the protections of minority rights. Of course, it can also include aspects of the processes that led to the Holocaust. Citizenship education deals with the rights of every person living in a given territory and thus addresses the active participation of all members of the society. These fields evolved quite separately, and they would benefit by being brought together.

#### Reach out to new target groups

HE as HRE is particularly promising when it is used to address adult target groups, such as policemen, social workers, and medical staff, in their professional training or in service training. It is also important not to limit it to formal or school education, but to address informal education as well, including municipal or community initiatives, community work, and neighbourhood initiatives.

Yet even if we want to focus mainly on schools, we could reinforce our action not only by addressing in-service training for teachers, but by focusing on teacher training institutes, and on pre-service training, reinforcing cooperation with the teachers and specialists responsible for training history and citizenship teachers in universities or professional colleges.

#### Develop experimental joint projects to bring together HRE and HE

He and HRE are both complex fields requiring very competent educators. It is difficult for one person to master both fields, so actors from both fields need to come together in person to exchange their knowledge and experiences. We need to experience models and methods that can bring the two topics together closer; this also means bringing together both the persons and the organizations involved in the two fields. Several concrete projects can be imagined:

- Promote collaboration by organizing conferences or joint seminars, activating networks of the two fields and building coalitions.
- Sponsor experimental projects and research studies, in order to develop new pedagogical concepts and materials, as we do not know enough about the methods and outcomes of joint learning.
- Promote experimental projects and actions in school, and in municipalities, neighbourhoods, and communities.

#### Conclusions

HE as a tool for HRE offers many possibilities, but it also has some limits. It seems crucial, however, for teachers to keep in mind four fundamental elements of HE and of HRE, in order to meet the basic requirements of both fields. First, it is important to learn the historical facts, and know about the process leading to the Holocaust. Second, attention must be paid not only to what happened during the era of National Socialism, but also to what happened afterwards, to the history of memory, and to the diversity of historical narratives. Third, it is important to address current violations of

HR, especially those occurring in our own society and in our own national contexts. Finally, we must challenge and deconstruct national myths about this history that are present in our own countries, and reflect on how to come to terms with each country's own past.

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